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The Community Empowerment Act and Localism under Devolution in Scotland: the perspective of multiple stakeholders in a council ward.

Abstract

Purpose – In Scotland the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act represents a significant development towards greater localism in the way public services are designed and delivered in Scotland. This also represents a different approach to that adopted in the rest of the UK. This article is the first in-depth case study of its kind to explore stakeholder perceptions of localism within a council ward.

Design/methodology/approach - This article is based on an in-depth exploratory case study of a single council ward in East Scotland. The fieldwork involved 61 in-depth interviews with multiple stakeholders including local councillors, public service managers and residents.

Findings - The findings highlight that, whilst the discourse of community empowerment represents policy divergence, there remain some significant structural and social barriers to meaningful community empowerment in practice. Finally, it is argued that there are three key factors to consider when developing community empowerment: a shared strategy, shared resources and shared accountability.

Originality/value – The research draws on extensive data from an in-depth case study to explore the realities of community empowerment within a single local authority ward. In doing so it provides a rich contextual narrative of how the rhetoric of community empowerment is perceived within a council ward setting.

KEY WORDS: Community empowerment, local democracy, devolution, localism, community, austerity

The development of localism and community empowerment in Scotland

The localism agenda is often seen to be encapsulated by the UK Government's Localism Act 2011. This agenda includes a commitment to greater community empowerment and local control of public finance. Yet it is argued that this agenda has not been pursued with the same vigour in Scotland (Blackburn and Keating, 2012) or rather that the approach in Scotland is grounded in a different ideological position (Painter and Pande, 2013). Importantly there is an explicit continuing commitment to tackling social inequalities within the Scottish approach to community empowerment. However, there are some interesting commonalities between the language of the Localism agenda in England, Communities First in Wales and the Community Empowerment agenda in Scotland – even if the principles and motivations differ. Whilst these commonalities and distinctions may be recognised within academia and at a policy level it remains unclear how they are perceived by stakeholders at a local level.

What is apparent is that it is difficult to draw comparisons between community empowerment policies in different countries as the term itself can mean so many different things. Whilst some have assessed the differences between, for example, asset-based community development (as opposed to community empowerment) in the US and Scotland (Macloed and Emejulu 2014) and community participation in England and Scotland (Rolfe 2016) these studies have also stressed the extent to which community development, community participation and community empowerment can all be interpreted in many different ways. As noted by Lawson and Kearns:

“The term ‘community empowerment’ has become ubiquitous in policy terms, but there is little articulation of what it means or how it plays out” (2010: 1459)

Thus the focus within this research is specifically within the Scottish context and as such builds on works which have explored related issues such as community planning, community

empowerment and local governance (Carley 2006; Sinclair 2008; Lawson and Kearns 2010 and Rolfe 2016).

Community empowerment within Scotland can be seen as a key component of the so-called 'Scottish Approach' to public services (Elvidge, 2011; Housden, 2014). This approach was developed under the first minority SNP administration from 2007 and is underpinned by three key principles: 1) an assets-based approach; 2) co-production of services and 3) an improvement philosophy (Cairney et al, 2016; Coutts and Brochie 2017; Ferguson, 2015).

The development of the Scottish Approach to public services was significantly influenced by the findings and recommendations of the Report on the Future Delivery of Public Services (Christie 2011), known as the Christie Commission after Dr Campbell Christie who chaired the commission.

The Christie Commission recommended that services should not be provided by 'top-down' administration but that people need to be directly involved in providing opinions on their local service provision (Christie 2011). It argued for a form of community empowerment that would improve the quality of community participation in the design and delivery of public services including integrated provision. This rhetoric is mirrored in the language of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

The significance of community empowerment and participation can also be seen in the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework (NPF). This was also created in 2007 to align organisations across the public sector with the Scottish Government's Strategic Purpose, 5 Strategic Objectives and 16 National Outcomes. This alignment is facilitated through Single Outcome Agreements (SOA's) which are agreed between the Scottish

Government and public bodies. SOAs are used to demonstrate how the NPF outcomes will be achieved and therefore the central government's goals are translated to the local level (McGarvey and Cairney 2008; Mackie 2013). Thus the whole of government has been adapted to an outcomes-focused approach to performance (Audit Scotland 2007; Scottish Government 2007a; Campbell 2012). The NPF underwent minor updates in 2011 and 2016 which did not make any structural changes to the framework (Scottish Government 2016) but did increase the number of National Indicators to 55. There was a more fundamental review of the NPF in 2017/18 and the updated version included 11 National Outcomes and 81 National Indicators.

One of the strategic objectives of the NPF is “[o]ur public services are high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people’s needs” (see NPF, p.296). Underpinning this strategic objective are the national indicators and targets which in the case of the relevant objective include to “improve people’s perceptions of the quality of public services delivered” and to “improve the responsiveness of public services” (see NPF, p.297).

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act itself can be traced back to the Community Empowerment Action Plan which was developed with the Scottish Government, COSLA and third sector organisations in 2009. The Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2009: 8) described a ‘process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them’. This ‘invigorating democracy’ was considered achievable because:

“Scotland’s communities are a rich source of talent and creative potential and the process of community empowerment helps to unlock that potential. It stimulates and

harnesses the energy of local people to come up with creative and successful solutions to local challenges”. (Scottish Government, 2009: 6)

Thus there is an alignment between the Scottish Government’s Strategic Purpose (as elaborated in the NPF), the overall principles of the so-called Scottish Approach to Public Services, and the ambitions of the Community Empowerment Act. What remains unclear is the extent to which local communities are aware, prepared, and willing to engage in the opportunities that might arise through these measures. In order to develop a greater insight into the perspective of local stakeholders, who might reasonably be expected to engage in these opportunities, this research is located within a single council ward.

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act was passed by the Scottish Parliament on 17 June 2015 and received Royal Assent on 24 July 2015. The Act as passed is fairly wide-ranging covering the statutory basis for the use of ‘National Outcomes’; reforms to the system of community planning; allowing community bodies to become involved in public services delivery; changes to the community right to buy land; allowing community bodies to take on assets from the public sector; reforms to the system of common good; allotments (also known as community gardens particularly in North America); and allowing local authorities to set their own reliefs for business rates. The presence of such a disparate range of issues within one Act is fairly common practice and in a sense demonstrates the wide and varied scope of local government services across the United Kingdom including Scotland.

Lack of Trust and Limited Transfer of Power

Existing studies point out that quite often Community Empowerment initiatives do not deliver power to the communities (Adamson and Bromley, 2009 and 2013). Conversely,

power is seen to remain in the hands of governing bodies and therefore no real empowerment is achieved. By definition empowerment means to tie action to discussion (Fung and Wright, 2001). So when decision-making processes are not linked to effective and real changes that affect the community, communities cannot be said to have been empowered. In other words, the effectiveness of empowerment is dependent on the amount of power that communities have to decide about the issues that affect them and that it is transferred, in this case, from local authorities.

The perceived failure to empower communities is seen as being directly related to the design of localism policy and to the management of the decision-making process: often they are not linked to strategic decisions due to the reluctance of local authorities. In this sense the decision-making process does not always recognise the power inequalities that exist in the relationship between partnerships and community members and can fail to realise the full potential of effective community empowerment. There are three related ways in which this affects the nature of community empowerment: firstly, by limiting the amount of power that is devolved to communities; secondly, by failing to recognise pre-existing power imbalances within communities, this raises issues related to participation, inclusion and accountability; and thirdly, by failing to take a joined-up strategic approach.

First of all, community empowerment initiatives are designed on the basis of a series of assumptions of how democracy should be articulated (Houghton and Blume, 2011). These assumptions determine the amount of power that is transferred to the community (Lawson and Kearns, 2010). For instance, within the current context of cuts to the welfare system, transferring power to communities can be seen as an opportunity to 'free' the state from some obligations that were making it 'unsustainable and inefficient' (Tannahill, 2014). Following

that premise, some initiatives are designed on the basis that communities once empowered might have the ability to attract funding from external sources and partners thus liberating local authorities from the financial burden of some of their activities. This might lead to lower budgets being dedicated to guarantee the continuity of these initiatives (Laverack and Wallerstein, 2001). According to the existing evidence, not having long-term funding for community based projects can generate high levels of frustration and disenchantment amongst the participants who feel their capacity to enact real change is being limited by authorities (Adamson and Bromley, 2008 and 2013).

Secondly, as noted by Lawson and Kearns (2010) one of the main barriers to achieve empowerment is that some of the policy conceptions of community empowerment are based on pluralistic assumptions of democratic participation. Pluralistic conceptions of participation assume that equal participation of stakeholders, authorities and citizens will lead to a weighted and therefore beneficial outcome for all participants involved. Nevertheless, it is notable that those pluralistic assumptions fail to take into consideration “unequal differences in power, culture and resources between the different partners” (Lawson and Kearns, 2010:1462). For instance, existing studies report that there is the risk that a small group of dominant stakeholders such as those who are better off can dictate the community needs (Laverack and Wallerstein, 2001). Those with the greatest assets and the loudest voice are likely to benefit the most when the initiatives are free for all and power relationships are not taken into account (Houghton and Blume, 2011; Attikinson, 1999). Consequently, it is critical to understand and analyse power relations within communities and between those and the partnerships to develop the potential for effective participatory governance (Bailey and Pill, 2015; Gaventa, 2004).

Finally, another of the major problems when designing community empowerment initiatives is where the new grassroots activity is not linked to strategic decisions and discussions (Houghton and Blume, 2011). Some empowerment initiatives overlap with wider national and regional policies and strategies (Adamson and Bromley, 2009) and therefore some of the core issues that affect communities cannot be addressed in these initiatives. In that sense, real empowerment is determined by the degree of decentralisation of central governments towards local partnerships. Nonetheless, existing literature reports a continued strategy of containment (Bailey and Pill, 2015; Houghton and Blume, 2011) in which residents in neighbourhoods are given limited control over target and resources and also authorities easily de-couple those initiatives when required. Communities are only incorporated in the planning and design of the initiatives once the boundaries of the programme have already been decided (Atkinson, 1999) and consequently their capacity to influence and decide is limited from the beginning. This containment strategy is also linked to the reluctance of local authorities to take seriously the new grassroots voice (Houghton and Blume, 2011) and the vagueness that surrounds the definition of community empowerment policy has also been used by authorities to adapt the concept to their own interests (Lawson and Kearns, 2014). This can trigger negative reactions on the participants such as the ones reported by Marcus et al. (2011) when some of the citizens involved felt 'used' by local services as free labour to legitimate their policies.

Lack of capacity and desire to participate in the process

There is a broad recognition of the increasing role of non-state providers, including community groups and 'active citizens' (Taylor and Bassi, 1998), in the provision of public services (Milligan and Fyfe, 2004; Milbourne, 2009; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Buser, 2013). Yet many studies raise questions about the effectiveness of such schemes in relation to the extent to which they foster greater partnership working (Milbourne 2009); support

increased opportunities for communities to challenge service delivery (Jones and Ormston, 2014); and support enhanced social cohesion and tolerance (Sloccock, 2015).

Where there have been successful attempts to develop community empowerment this has typically been supported by steady and sustained investment in capacity building activities. It is noted that the development of new partnership structures do not, in and of themselves, address differences in power between community groups and regeneration professionals (Diamond, 2004) whilst others have highlighted the value of the social capital concept as a lens through which to assess some of the dilemmas inherent in the localism agenda (Holman and Rydin, 2013). It has been suggested elsewhere that capacity building may be a way through which to overcome some of these potential challenges (Kirk and Shutte, 2004).

Within Scotland a set of National Standards for Community Engagement were established which included that “all participants should be given the opportunity to build on their knowledge and skills” (Communities Scotland, 2005: 5). This included a commitment to opportunities for training and for regular review of development needs. These commitments were developed further within the Building Community Capacity (Scottish Community Development Centre, 2007) report which recognised that, “Effective engagement with and action by communities requires support to the development of their skills and confidence” (p.2). Yet the only mention of training within the Community Empowerment Act as presented is in relation to local authorities providing training to tenants, or potential tenants, of allotments. This mirrors the findings from elsewhere that staff training is needed in order to support effective community empowerment (Adamson and Bromiley 2013). In the latest update to the National Standards for Community Engagement the emphasis on development and training had been somewhat diluted so that where once there had been a commitment that

“[a]ll participants have access to support and to opportunities for training or reflection on their experiences, to enable them and others to take part in an effective, fair and inclusive way”(Communities Scotland, 2005: 16) now “[p]articipants are supported to develop their skills and confidence during the engagement” (Communities Scotland, 2015: 16)

Although the National Standards relate to community engagement as opposed to community empowerment this does provide a valuable insight into some of the potential challenges of the community empowerment agenda. Similar concerns about the need for organisational and staff development have been raised within the response to consultation on the Scottish Government’s Bill (see, for example, Glasgow City Council as cited by Campbell, 2014) and elsewhere (Tannahill, 2014). As has argued by Adamson and Bromiley (2013) effective community empowerment must be supported by effective investment in communities. Yet it could be argued that building community capacity will prove difficult in a context of austerity where local authority resources continue to be cut (Jones and Ormston, 2014). There is a sense here of a tension between the austerity-driven policy of budgetary cuts to local government and of supporting greater community empowerment. Empowerment of communities requires investment in communities.

What is apparent is that any form of community empowerment requires a degree of governance capacity at the community level. Within Scotland there are a number of bodies who can contribute to capacity building in relation to governance. For example, Third Sector Interfaces, Big Lottery Fund, the Association of Chief Officers of Scottish Voluntary Organisations (ACOSVO) and Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO). Yet it is frequently noted that developing capacity in leadership, governance and partnership working is very difficult (Sullivan et al., 2006; Sinclair, 2011). The Community

Empowerment Act 2015 does not take account of these challenges and does not put systems in place to further support the capacity of communities to become more empowered.

What is more, it is evident that, where communities have been successful in exercising their right to challenge and right to buy, they are not always capable of sustaining the new local governance of these services after the initial project funding has ended (Pill and Bailey, 2012). Models of governance are multi-faceted and complex. For example, the Community Planning Partnerships introduced by the Scottish Government in the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 have proven to be highly complex, imbued with power struggles and historical conflicts and at times exclusive of the communities they are meant to represent (Sinclair, 2011 and Matthews, 2012, 2014). Following the Christie Commission (2011) on the future delivery of public services the Scottish Government conducted a review of the Community Planning Partnerships and later published a 'Statement of Ambition' (Scottish Government / COSLA, 2012) which stated that CPP's would 'drive the pace of service integration, increase the focus on prevention and secure continuous improvement in public service delivery, in order to achieve better outcomes for communities'. Whilst the problems encountered by CCP's are not related to the Community Empowerment Act 2015 it is worth noting that many issues still remain (Audit Scotland, 2014).

Another example of potential challenges in the operation of Community Empowerment lies in the parts of the Act that legislate for asset transfer. Evidence on how many communities have enacted their right to take ownership of public assets, and to what extent this has been successful, is surprisingly scant. The first annual report into Community Empowerment was due to be published in June 2018 but is not yet available. Furthermore, in a statement to the Scottish Parliament, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities

noted that any evaluation had not yet taken place and that figures on asset transfer prior to the Act were not collected (The Scottish Parliament, 2018). Evidence, both as stated in Parliament (ibid, 2018) and in academic research (Fischer and McKee, 2017), highlight a number of challenges and issues in making asset transfer work. In particular these issues relate to capacity development and as such it would seem to be important that moves to develop a greater level of community empowerment and involvement in public service delivery would include steps to organisational and community capacity development.

Lack of participation and enduring inequalities

Enduring inequality has a significant impact on the potential for further community empowerment as inequalities have been found to affect health, education, training, housing and geographical access to services (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2005; van Twist *et al.* 2015). There is also, for those in areas of multiple deprivation, a sense of mistrust of the State and a feeling that they are unheard and misunderstood. Whilst many initiatives are targeted at less affluent localities it has been noted that often they fail to address real community concerns in the way the community might like it (Rifkin, 1990; Matthews, 2011; Willis and Jeffares, 2012). Thus there is an opportunity for greater community empowerment to enable communities to have a greater say in the services they receive. Yet it is unclear whether those communities with greatest need would participate. It is also unclear, in cases of asset transfer in particular, what would happen in cases where this were to fail. Would communities be left with the consequences of such failure or, in the case of an important public resource, would the local authority or Scottish Government step in to bring such assets back 'in-house'?

A further concern in deprived areas is the typically low levels of civic participation. It is widely recognised that those who are more affluent are those who participate more often and more effectively (Fung and Wright 2001; Baiman 2006). For instance evidence has suggested that middle-class residents are generally more 'advantaged in their use of local public services compared to poorer social groups' (Hastings and Matthews 2011, p.5). This is due to the fact that middle class service users take action and are proactive in their relationship with their local public services. They benefit more than any other social class from public services through being influential, empowered citizens who raise their voices and complain if they see fit. These complaints are effective as they show better presence, engagement and entitlement than less affluent social groups (Hastings and Matthews, 2011). This raises a significant issue around how community engagement will affect, and be affected by, different social groups.

There is also an inherent risk in any form of community empowerment that those who do participate do so for personal gains as opposed to representing the communal interests of the locality. Crucially, current moves towards greater community empowerment are occurring within a wider context of austerity where local government services are being cut and those who are less affluent are being affected most (Hastings *et al.* 2012; Besemer and Bramley 2012). As a result the risks of greater community empowerment may be faced disproportionately by those in areas of multiple deprivation. In circumstances where services are taken over by a community group and subsequently fail it remains unclear what would then happen to those services. Furthermore is notable that cuts to public services will often hit areas of multiple deprivation most as more affluent areas tend to find alternatives in place of a specific public service (Hastings *et al.* 2012).

In the context of a lack of trust and limited transfer of power; lack of capacity and desire to participate in the process; and lack of participation and enduring inequalities it is important to consider how communities may respond to attempts to further empower communities. Firstly however it is helpful to recognise those factors which have been found to support effective community engagement and empowerment.

Conceptualising community empowerment

Lawson and Kearns (2014) set out a model of community empowerment which stressed three elements to effective community engagement – capability, deciding and achieving. There is, within their paper, a recognition that community organisations must be representative of and engage with the wider community and with other community organisations and networks. However, the three elements outlined above are seen to reside specifically within the community organisations. In this paper we explore those factors that must exist across the community organisation, the wider community and the public service environment (including other community organisations and networks) in order to ensure that effective community empowerment takes place.

The next section of this paper outlines the key findings from our research into community empowerment and localism under devolution in Scotland. Using inductive analysis of our findings we uncovered three key aspects that were felt to be essential to effective community empowerment – shared resources; shared strategy; shared accountability.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1 – Model of Strategic Community Empowerment

Enablers of Strategic Community Empowerment

This research project is focused on a case study of a single ward area in East Scotland. The nature of the research is qualitative and exploratory as we aim to explore and understand perceptions of the communities' experiences (Lipscomb 2012).

A convenience sampling approach was taken involving two phases: phase one involved non-probability purposive sampling by identifying key stakeholders; phase two involved snowball sampling to identify public service users. In total the findings of this case study draw on 61 semi-structured interviews with 4 MSP's and MP's [P], 10 local and community councillors [C], 1 Audit Scotland officer [AS], 19 public service managers [M], and 27 local residents [R] and activists [A] in the ward.

A case study approach was adopted for this research as it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the concept of community in the natural context of a single community area as represented by a single ward (Woodside 2010; Lapan et al 2012). Within a case study the participants' own reality and perception on the subject can be thoroughly compared to other participants' to determine whether all have the same perception or whether they agree on specific issues (Rowley 2002). Whilst it is recognised that ward areas do not necessarily delineate community areas but rather are political constructs this was still seen as a useful unit of measurement for investigation as the electoral ward is the smallest electoral unit. Furthermore it allowed for the exploration of relationships between local authority officers, elected politicians, community activists and members of the public.

Case studies are particularly effective when researching current issues or when an awareness of different stakeholders is sought after (Silverman 2009; Swanborn 2010; Saunders et al. 2012). Single case studies have also been used by others in exploring issues related to community empowerment (Lawson and Kearns, 2010). As such this approach was seen to be particularly apt for this research. Where this study is unique is in offering the perspectives of multiple stakeholders within a single ward area. As such it represents the first in-depth case study of community empowerment within a local ward area.

The ward studied comprises of a number of distinct areas and has a total population in excess of 30,000 inhabitants. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a ranking system that uses criteria including income, employment and housing to assess relative levels of deprivation. According to these statistics the case study ward has higher levels of deprivation than across the local authority area as a whole. Yet the ward also contains specific areas with some of the most affluent households. This makes for an interesting case as areas with differing socio-economic characteristics within them can help to highlight dissimilar needs and expectations (Duffy 2000; Hastings et al. 2012; Matthews and Besemer 2014).

In order to expose these perceptions this research adopted an explorative scope to analyse and code the data obtained from the interviewing process. Inductive coding was applied to better comprehend the different forms of soft data obtained such as descriptions, views, emotions and interpretations (Walliman 2006) that were categorised according to the themes emerging during the analysis.

The research took place between 2011-2017 with the data collection occurring in 2013-14 to coincide with the development of the community empowerment legislation. Interviews were transcribed and coded using Nvivo9. Whilst NVivo is not a data analysis tool it provides the facility for analysis through the systematic organisation and coding of qualitative data (Gibbs 2002). This was found to be particularly helpful in this research given the amount of data collected. The findings of this research remain highly relevant as the first conducted in-depth study of the perspectives of stakeholders towards community empowerment within a single ward.

Shared Strategy

Many respondents, particularly those from more deprived areas of the ward, commented on the extent to which they felt their views did not matter and many stated a degree of disillusionment with the political process. Even community activists pointed to a sense of apathy:

Activism died away just due to apathy or getting fed up fighting with the council (A1).

I have only been active in community activities for 2 and a half years but given the lack of progress, if it continues then I will probably feel like what I say doesn't count (A4).

The sense of being disempowered was very notable across many participants in the research:

I don't think they [locals] are very empowered. I don't think they feel that they can change anything or that they have a voice. Because no one ever asked what you think of about the services. They should be asking what people want (R13).

Consequently residents felt that they could not influence decision-making and, even if they did, it would not make any difference.

The sense of the current system lacking equity was noted by many participants in the research. The relationship between communities and local authorities was represented by one public service manager as:

It is very much council policies dripping down. ... Joined up work does not exist between the local council and the community. (M1)

Likewise a local councillor recognised:

The money going in to areas like [areas of multiple deprivation], are they just maintaining the status quo as it's always been or are they getting better? Probably not. (C2).

Similarly a public service manager highlighted some of the issues around poor decision making:

The council still have autonomies to make decisions on its priorities and often the decisions reached do not reflect the local communities' priority (M13).

The Community Empowerment Act may create opportunities for more strategic alignment between community organisations and the needs and aspirations of the wider community.

However, the risk is, without dialogue and shared understanding, affluent areas may receive a better level of service than those with multiple deprivation (Matthews and Hastings, 2013).

Indeed it has been found that strategic partnership working, at least in the form of community planning partnerships, can itself create barriers to community empowerment (Matthews, 2014).

One area where participants felt greater community involvement could improve public service delivery was in adopting a longer-term, strategic, perspective. It was noted that at present many council initiatives existed for two to three years during which they would

perform well yet the time would not be long enough to carry out a sustained change process with lasting impact. As the following public service managers explained,

People talk about parachuters, initiatives parachute into the area for short term and then they are parachuting back up (M10).

Very often projects are set up for a period of two to three years when they do good work. And then funding stops and projects close down. They helped some people but intergenerational poverty means people need long term support to make long lasting changes to their lives (M11).

There needs to be long focused plans and not short term solutions to things. I don't know if it is the money thing or that's the way it is done. Everything is a quick fix, short term solution. Nothing thought out properly. (M9).

Clearly there was a sense that short-term budgetary decision making had a negative effect on the impact of community-based activities. Most managers suggested that the council did not work with the locality as it could and that meaningful change could only be possible through better engagement with local communities. As M13 discussed,

Individual and community change takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. The council do get disappointed because they want to see the results and outcomes. It takes time and results sometime show up in different places but the council don't know it. If you listen what people are saying and actually listen than it works. That's how it is but people like to try to reinvent the wheel and try something else and try a new model. As I work if you start with people and the issues important to them you can't go wrong. The council start from the opposite end: 'here is where we want to be'... it doesn't work. It leads to frustration on both sides (M13).

Again this highlights the extent to which community empowerment may offer opportunities for better delivery of services but only where there is a shared strategy between community groups, the local council, and other relevant public bodies.

Many of those spoken to as part of this research, both managers and residents, believed that more collaboration amongst public service organisations was possible and could result in improved services. But crucially this was also seen to require a sharing of skills and expertise (M4, M5, M21, A7). The following AS officer affirmed that there was plenty to do about partnership work:

There is a lot of scope for public bodies to work together to address that preventative agenda. The challenge what CPPs have is that you are looking at new ways of working with an old ways of accountability and governance. So at one hand there is often kind of people protecting their own little patch similarly if you make someone accountable for expenditure within the local authority they are less likely to be willing to surrender some of that responsibility. The question is whether CPPs can achieve under the current accountability frameworks. Part of the problem is that each of the local authorities has its own budget. And they are saying: 'I'm accountable how much money I spend, if I surrender some of that to the CPP and they spend the money the least appropriate manner, because I am responsible for that expenditure, I am the one with the blame for that money being spent badly'. That's the kind of challenge (AS).

This exemplifies the need for new models of accountability and sharing of resources in order to facilitate and promote effective community empowerment. As such a shared strategy is clearly not enough – there is also a need for shared resources and shared accountability.

Shared resources

It could be argued that the development and implementation of the Community Empowerment Act will purposively redress the current lack of partnership working. Yet it would be misleading to assume that both the local authority and any local community group

are starting from the same power basis in terms of access to skills, finance and experience.

The success of any renewed partnership working will be dependent, in part, on how financing arrangements are agreed and how community groups are supported in taking over new levels of empowerment.

Many participants, particularly residents and activists, noted that the present system and culture was one of disempowerment as represented in the following interview extract with a local activist,

It is a whole culture of disempowerment: let the system do its work and try to make the best of it. For people to feel heard and worth say anything they would need to feel like their voices are valued and has the potential to influence. People are not used to making decisions together so we as a community need to relearn it. Lots of skills involved in decision making and we are deskilled on how to make decisions because we are all outsourced to experts making it for us. We don't even know what to do with power (A2).

Likewise it was apparent from interviews that there was a significant disparity between the financial assets of local councils and those of community groups. Continued local government budget cuts and the increasingly short-term nature of budgeting decisions were seen to pose a potential threat to attempts to develop community empowerment activities.

I worry about the future constantly as we are funded from year to year. We don't know until the month before if we will still get funds so we can't plan ahead and that makes it difficult to retain staff because of this uncertainty. It has always been like this [over 20 years now] (M2).

Again the Community Empowerment Act provides opportunities for better sharing of resources and indeed such sharing may be essential to enable successful outcomes.

Whilst the Community Empowerment Act may enable greater sharing of resources there was also a sense that the process of enabling greater community empowerment may be linked to a desire for more cost savings. There was a sense, for many, that lack of funding for public services was increasingly being cut and a fear was expressed that moves towards greater community empowerment were motivated, or at least influenced, by this wider context. For example one public service manager explained,

As a result of the cuts while before they [the council] gave us three year contract, now they give us one year; because they don't want to commit themselves for three years (M16).

Consequently many suggested that the Community Empowerment Act would not sufficiently address the nature of budgetary planning and resourcing of public services.

Every approach we get is short term for these serious factors. 3-5 years and when the money runs out the results are still not there. Some folks managed to reduce their intakes but as the support decreased they increased their intakes too so there were no long term changes. It is never ending (M15).

Such views led managers to be rather pessimistic about the future and sceptical of the motivations and potential outcomes of further community empowerment without greater sharing of resources.

Yet the likelihood of greater sharing of resources was seen as highly unlikely. Again this related to issues of power and control. A large number of research participants raised concerns about the extent to which local authorities would view community empowerment as a further challenge to their power. As one public service manager stated:

At the minute it is very top-down approach with the council having the power. When groups become too powerful in the council's eye then the council cuts their funding... I don't think council people want local people to have the power. (M10)

There was clear concern from many that the benefits of community empowerment would not happen unless there were real and significant attempts to share resources between local councils, community groups and other associated bodies. The continued risk of further cuts was discussed by many participants who noted that often those services to be cut were also some of the most popular as recognised by the following manager,

It seems to be the most valuable services and what people really really [sic] need that get the cuts. Public services here are in danger too. There is no evidence that a lot of money is being put in this area (M9).

There was, as hinted at in the above quote, a sense of council spending being focused within the centre of the local authority area and on so-called 'vanity projects' to the detriment of services targeted at more deprived communities on the periphery of the area. Of course it is difficult to assess the extent to which council funding is targeted at specific localities and how then that funding benefits individuals or communities. However, there was a sense of resentment amongst many who felt unable to do their job as best as they wished they could. Especially when they considered that their services were touching people's lives and so changing attitudes and lifestyles.

With so many of the participants there was a sense that there currently was not any meaningful relationship between the needs and wants of local communities and the decision-making of local authorities. Whilst the Community Empowerment Act was seen to offer some potential for greater sharing of resources it was felt that local councils would see this as a direct threat to their status and consequently would be resistant. Yet a shared strategy cannot be effective without shared resources. At the same time it is important that accountability is shared. There is the potential therefore, if not an outright need, for

community empowerment to include measures to improve lines of accountability between local authorities, other service providers, and the local community.

Shared Accountability

Local authorities in Scotland represent relatively large areas and so the link between local authorities and communities is arguably not as strong as in other parts of Europe. For example, in countries with a similar population size, such as Norway, Denmark and Finland, there is much more local representation (434 municipalities, 98 municipalities and 342 municipalities respectively). As a public service manager commented:

If you looked at democratic structure at the local level, they are very weak actually we have a very centralised distribution of power in this country. (M11).

In this context there is a significant challenge in how to empower local communities where power has been highly centralised for so long and, having done so, how to ensure community groups will be accountable to the wider public.

Whilst for some communities there was clearly an appetite for greater empowerment and existing groups and activists ready to support such moves, for other communities this was certainly not the case. This lack of apparent enthusiasm for community empowerment seemed to be linked to a long-standing lack of engagement or tradition of community empowerment. In fact there was, for some, a lack of any conceivable sense of community. In part this was due to communities being increasingly fragmented and transient as noted by the following local activist:

[this is] a very middle class area, with mainly private housing, which tends to rely on the private sector rather than the public for services. There is no heart to the area, no

centre area for [the neighbourhood] partly because people work during the day, men and women so there is not a lot going on within the [neighbourhood] area either (A9).

This perspective was reflected in many of the interviews. In this context it is perhaps wise that no attempt has been made to define 'community' within the Community Empowerment Act. Yet, this leaves unanswered the question of how accountability will be assured within an increasingly fragmented, multi-agency, polity.

For many the lack of enthusiasm for additional community empowerment was due to a sense that the current system worked quite well. The Local authority was seen, by some, to work quite well as explained by the following local resident:

We know how to get social work, we know how to get care, we know how to get the best out of the community. You know we contact the councillor if we are not happy where people parking, so I am aware that we are extraordinarily lucky where we are (R24).

The lack of appetite for change was recognised across all groups spoken to during the research. As a local councillor noted:

People who go to [the local] community council are very articulate, they know how to become self-advocates, they don't have to wait for the council, the councillors to take action they are just as able to take action by themselves by writing etc. (C3).

What emerged through the research was a general sense that those in affluent areas lacked any appetite for change as they saw the current system as working well whilst those in less affluent areas lacked any appetite for change due to a lack of trust in the motivations for change, lack of capacity and a lack of desire to be more engaged in public service design and delivery. As the following manager put it:

In good areas people petition and very good to voice their opinion. In [less affluent areas] people are so busy struggling with their lives and to cope with their situations that they are not good at this (M14).

This quote serves to support the findings of Hastings and Matthews (2011), Hastings et al. (2012) and Matthews and Hastings (2013) in showing how middle-class activism can distort social policy outcomes. In this sense it is unclear what problem the Community Empowerment Act is seeking to address. Clearly in affluent areas communities already feel adequately empowered through existing mechanisms. Those in less affluent areas do not feel empowered yet are not necessarily in a position to fully benefit from greater moves towards community empowerment. The question is then raised as to whether greater community empowerment would enable those from more deprived areas to become as empowered as those currently within affluent areas currently feel?

In part this again comes back to issues around the lack of proper accountability within the current systems. As noted above there is a significant literature base which highlights the extent to which those with influence on local government decision-making are also those who are most affluent. As summed up by one public service manager:

People in better off areas get better services (M13).

The influence of affluence on community empowerment continues to be raised as a significant potential barrier to positive outcomes. It remains unclear how greater community empowerment would address issues of accountability and equity.

Conclusions

The drive towards greater localisation in design and delivery of public services is one that is gaining momentum across the UK and further afield. In Scotland the Community

Empowerment Act provides a framework for communities to have a greater say in the way public services are designed and delivered. In many respects the approach to Community Empowerment in Scotland is representative of a wider Scottish Approach to Public Services (Cairney *et al.*, 2016; Elvidge, 2011; Housden, 2014) and, in particular, the continued commitment to tackling social inequalities demonstrates a divergence from other UK approaches (specifically in England).

What comes across quite clearly from the literature, and reinforced within the findings, is that there remains a significant lack of trust, lack of capacity and lack of desire for further community empowerment. Clearly this research has been focused purely on one council ward and it may be the case that there are significant variations across different ward areas and different councils. Nonetheless the evidence presented from this case provides significant evidence from those very people who would be expected to be engaged by the mechanisms in the Community Empowerment Act for the newly developed policy to have any positive impact.

Whilst this research has focused on community empowerment it is felt that research at the ward-level of local democracy remains limited. As such it is felt that further studies of public services at the ward level are warranted. In particular it was found within a number of the interviews that elected representatives were often unaware of the characteristics and issues within the areas they represented. Similarly, residents often complained about seeing neither local councillors nor parliamentary representatives within the area. Therefore, further investigation into the work of elected members at ward level is recommended. In particular it would be interesting to explore the relationship between the public and elected members in

local areas where there is greater levels of representation (such as in Austria, Belgium, France and Sweden).

The overall conclusion is that community empowerment cannot happen in a strategy vacuum. For community empowerment to be effective it must be supported by a shared strategy, shared resources and shared accountability between all parties involved. This requires significant coordination, support and development activity. It is therefore recommended that, where community empowerment is to be promoted, efforts must be made to ensure that communities are supported with significant training and development. Furthermore, empowerment must be appropriately funded and accountability mechanisms reformed to ensure that those who are entrusted with public resources are also answerable to the public. Within Scotland it is yet to be seen how, or indeed if, this will happen.

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Figure 1: Model of Strategic Community Empowerment

